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THE RURAL COMMUNITY AND CHURCH FEDERATION

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The value or effectiveness of any social force, be that force an individual or an organization, depends upon a right adjustment to its surroundings or conditions. One church in a rural neighborhood may be of great value in furnishing a community center from which may emanate a great variety of wholesome influences. It does not follow, however, that "because one is good more are better." While one man-loving minister in a parish of from six hundred to one thousand people may devote himself most unselfishly to community building, this same minister, where there are more than one, will be liable to turn his attention from neighborhood development to the problem of how to keep his own church alive. Going still farther, we shall find that the man who under certain circumstances may be the personification of unselfishness, in a different proportional relationship to his task becomes a victim of mean jealousy. Indeed we need not be surprised should we discover that the more earnest and zealous the leader is by temperament the more bitter and narrow will be his rivalry when placed in a restricted environment. No ordinary village parish is large enough to call forth the unselfish and unalloyed devotion of more than one church or one strong pastor, and consent to a different proportional relationship will generally be at the cost of that God-given sense of responsibility which calls forth effective service. In one church to a village we are very likely to witness struggle for accomplishment and the fighting of different forms of evil; while in the case of several churches to a like community we see mere struggle for existence and the fighting of each other.

In these days of much concern about rural social conditions it is realized that if we would reach the possible advantages of country life the law of social contact must be regarded, and the divided

religious activities be made to converge in a community center. It is also coming to be realized that this cannot be done by the immediate overthrow of all denominationalism. Those affections and ideals which for centuries have kept great bodies in existence cannot be lightly regarded or speedily transformed. Eventually we may discover that the ideals of the different leading churches are the same, but concentration on one particular method in expressing the common feelings must be by growth and adaptation.

For some time to come "denominations" will continue, but in rural districts, if they are to be effective, they cannot continue independently, nor, indeed, is it necessary. Speaking of this as an age of specialists, Dean Mathews in his usually suggestive manner says: "I do not myself see why denominationalism may not in itself be regarded as a phase of the division of labor in the church universal." In the large center we can have the specialist and he can help humanity in the sphere in which he excels; but the country district has limitations. It must be satisfied with the general practitioner. How fortunate if, as is sometimes the case, that general practitioner can combine in one office the strong points of several specialists, and even be a leader and authority on questions not conventionally related to his calling! For example, Dr. Jean François Oberlin, in the valley of the Vosges, in addition to performing his religious ministrations became a road-builder, a teacher in agriculture, the developer of a school system. This same man, with tactful regard for the different customs of his parishioners, at the Communion table provided a wafer for the Catholic, unleavened bread for the Lutheran, and leavened bread for the Calvinist, while in his general ministrations he reached the heart-needs of all and finally established a church, which, while probably not continuing to observe different customs, was antagonistic to none. Thus Lutheran, Calvinist, and Catholic were guided by its light and comforted by its warmth. Dr. Oberlin had a hard task and in his work he manifested great courage and resourcefulness, but had he been one of several pastors in that string of mountain villages, no matter how supported, his talents and devotion would have been largely wasted, and, instead of coming to receive as a crowning event of his long pastorate recognition from the governments of

Europe, he would either have given up broken-hearted or have moved to other ground.

It is a great mistake to feel that those ideas and positions which have given different denominations of Christians long and honorable existence are in themselves antagonistic. On the other hand, we are finding them to be complementary. Sectarianism, a thing very different from denominationalism, has come to emphasize points which the fathers in the faith never emphasized, and to regard as of holy import some things which the earlier saints considered as incidental. Baptist historians, for example, will support the assertion that among the early forefathers, as among many strong adherents of the church of today, the ordinance of baptism, as by them administered, is not a major promise but an incident subordinate to that one great and now generally appreciated principle, the right of every man to work out through his own religious experience his idea of God, and from his independent study his methods of Christian practice. To John Knox certain forms of church government and customs in service, strong and beautiful as they may be, were not nearly so fundamental as to some Presbyterians of a later day. Certainly John Wesley, when setting forth the needs and possibilities of the personal religious experience and personal responsibility, had no vision of the elaborate system to which such a multitude pay reverential regard. These subordinate points have their value, and are esteemed as of great importance by some, but they are not the cardinal points which called forth the devotion of our respective forefathers. The cardinal points were principles which have value for all, the emphasis on which was called forth by particular circumstances which started the denominations.

While the rural church of the coming days must be determined in its form less by past tradition than by intelligent co-ordination of those tried-out methods which are proving effective, it must, at least in the beginning of the adjustment, have regard for such denominational characteristics and interests as are represented in the community. This can be done without division either as to organization or as to sentiment. In taking members into a federated church it was the writer's habit to exhort the applicants to

bring with them the strength of their respective churches. On one evening we welcomed into fellowship nine people representing three denominations, namely, three Presbyterians, three Congregationalists, and three Disciples; and, while we touched on the heart-love of each, our greetings were not found to conflict. In coming into the federated fellowship the Presbyterians still felt their loyalty to the faith of their fathers. Why not? They had been enrolled as Presbyterians, the General Assembly had made provision for such a move, and had not the minister requested them to benefit all with the good things for which their church stood? The Congregationalists could still rejoice in their independence and democracy. The Disciples were not conscious of any deviations from their devotion to the letter of Scripture. In days gone by the struggle for religious liberty had resulted in that mutual forbearance which made possible undisturbed separate existence. The act referred to simply indicated that mutual forbearance had reached the point of mutual appreciation, making possible harmony in close contact. In that congregation, though the place of assembly was miles from a town, there was no occasion to refer to declining rural church attendance. The building was filled from end to end and more than half were men. As an expression of sincere feeling they frequently sang "Blest be the tie that binds," recognizing as that tie not a sectarian name but a common community feeling.

In the community church mentioned, and in other federations of like character, it has been proved that different denominations may receive recognition and at the same time supplement each other and within the same assembly; that the manifestation of charity and mutual appreciation does not necessarily involve compromise. As a rule differences of opinion in matters of interpretation do not form the natural religious alignments anyway. In either of the representative churches we may find as much difference in opinion as between individuals taken from the different churches. Still they work together without difficulty. Take for instance a Baptist association. In its personnel are ministers from the seminaries in Chicago, in Rochester, and in Louisville—men grounded in different interpretations, exponents of somewhat widely differing ideas on Scripture and in philosophy, but all feeling the life which comes from the spirit of Christ, and all fired by the same

desire to see men freed from wrong entanglements. In this common feeling and desire they experience their bonds of brotherhood. They are joined on ideals, not on ideas. When the first churches were organized it was not on the basis of doctrine, nor for the purpose of becoming exponents of particular theories. They were voluntary gatherings of people actuated by the spirit which Jesus showed, and their banding together was for the economic use of their opportunities, and for mutual assistance in times of need. The same basis of organization is possible in the average rural community of the present day, and rural Christendom will not be disloyal to convictions if it ceases to endure the deadening influence of division.

As a possible method for the federating of the different religious forces of any country place, we will quote the Articles of Federation which we prepared for the consolidation of the Baptist and Methodist churches of Mosier, Oregon, which churches, together with people of other evangelical groups and some of simple Christian character without particular designation, formed one of the most united, unselfish, and considerate congregations it was ever our privilege to know. In setting forth these articles we would wish it understood that the result described is not considered an end in itself. We realize that the critic may see difficulty arising out of a long-continued attempt to conserve the rights and affections of different denominations within one body. The effort looks forward to a united Christendom, or at least to a simple church peculiar to country places in which there has been a natural and gradual blending of the different lines of emphasis. While desiring organic union it realizes that all cannot go from the cellar to the top floor at one jump. We are growing nearer together, but the process is slow, and we cannot afford to leave country districts subject to their present disadvantages until headquarters have come together in a single center. This constitution with modifications has been used in a variety of places and is as follows:

ARTICLE 1. This federation shall be called the Immanuel Church (Baptist and Methodist).

ART. 2. Its purpose shall be the teaching of the gospel and plan of ethics as taught by Jesus Christ, the public worship of God, the expression of Christian spirit in the spread of the gospel among all peoples, and the encouragement

of such social matters as may tend to the upbuilding of the home community. In the teaching, disputed points shall be left to the individual conscience and the individual responsibility before God, only advising that each one be true to himself.

ART. 3. The membership shall consist of such as are now members of either organization, without change of the particular designation, and of such others as may be members of any evangelical church, who may be enrolled according to their denomination, and their letter kept in custody for any future need, and of those who from time to time shall come into possession of a religious experience through conversion. In the admission of converts permission shall be given to enrol under whichever name the individual may desire, care having been taken to allow for the intellectual satisfaction of the conscience. In the case of the ordinance of baptism, provision shall be made for its administration according to the desire of the candidate and by such person as shall be in full sympathy with the act.

Letters of dismissal shall bear the name of the federation and shall be dismissed as from the federation.

[By modification of Article 3, this constitution may be adapted to conditions where just one denomination has a church in a locality in which the large majority of people are of other relationships. In such case the federation would consist of said church, together with those allied to other evangelical bodies in sympathy with the same general idea, and who would be enrolled as above stated, the entire congregations adopting some name of community significance. (Such arrangement is wise only when the original church can enter unresistingly into the movement, feeling that by so doing it will better adapt itself to community needs.) Adaptation may also be made in the organization of a church in localities where several different denominations are represented, while only one church center is practical.]

ART. 4. The minister shall be a regularly ordained clergyman, recognized in the circles of an evangelical church having general recognition in this state; said minister shall be expected to continue his association with his own body but in his ministrations to this federation shall recognize and live up to the basis on which it is established. He shall be the choice of a two-thirds vote of a quorum at a specially called meeting of the church.

ART. 5. The building shall be turned over to the use of the federation and shall be kept in repair by the organization during the continuation of the federation. The property as such shall, for the time, remain in the hands of the present trustees of the church used.

ART. 6. The officers of this federation shall be the pastor, *ex-officio*, a clerk and treasurer, and three deacons who, with two other members to be chosen by a majority of the congregation, shall constitute an executive committee and shall represent as nearly as possible the personnel of the federation.

ART. 7. The general expenses, care of building, and running expenses of service shall be borne by the federation as such and without any reference to any past ratio.

ART. 8. Four regular collections shall be taken during the year for missionary purposes and shall be divided equally between the two federated churches. Any special collection may be taken only by consent of the congregation.

[In congregations differently related the benevolences may be arranged for by a missionary committee, the same to make distribution according to the varied desires.]

ART. 9. If for any purpose either or any denomination forming a part of this federation desires a meeting for its own particular purpose, such meeting may be held in the church building, provided it does not interfere with the regular services of the federation.

ART. 10. This federation shall be in effect for at least two years.

ART. 11. This constitution may be changed or amended by a two-thirds vote of a special meeting called for that purpose.

Not only could it be claimed for this particular federation that there was no neutralizing of real forces nor any compromise, but on the other hand it could be justly claimed that each brought a contribution of worthy suggestion, adding to the total strength of the assembly. The presence of the Episcopalian was recognized, and it tended to the greater refinement of the service, a much-needed influence in the average country church; the Methodist kept us in mind of that inherent appetite of the soul which naturally seeks for stimulation through religious fervor; the presence of the Baptist kept prominent the sacred value of the personal religious experience in the final conclusions of religious faith; the Presbyterian necessitated a frequent consideration of the regularity, precision, and that reverential orderliness which arises so naturally from the Calvinistic emphasis. All together the people proceeded toward one common goal, and that in harmony with personal conviction. In their work the thought of church-building was displaced by that of community interest. The only time we ever heard church claims mentioned was when a Baptist asked if the Methodists had received their full share of a certain missionary offering.

The strong devotees of any church need feel no alarm about consolidation, nor think that the ideas they cherish will be obscured by contact with phases of religious thinking emphasized by other people. Indeed they might be glad of the opportunity which

federation affords to reveal the benefits of their positions in the midst of others. The only ones who need to fear are those who have a narrow view of their church position, or such as have personal interests to defend. Vital principle need not be sacrificed.

While it is generally recognized that something must be done if the vital religious and social life of country districts be conserved, the efforts looking toward the community center are, according to our own experience and study of the question, confronted by at least three well-defined obstacles: First, we have a traditional conservatism in a small minority, generally though not always among the older people. This minority will seldom exceed 10 per cent of the people interested, and would not be long effective were it not for an outside sectarian leadership which keeps active this so-called loyalty. This outside group, which constitutes our second obstacle, will often include the ministers of the various small churches; for in all too many cases the country ministry, on account of its transitory character, may be thought of as outside the real life of the community. But the conservative minority and the outside officials could not in a great many cases long prevent rural consolidation were it not for a third party which comes to their assistance with money. This third party, constituting the most formidable obstacle, is the "home missionary department" of the different churches. A few instances taken from immediate observation and experience in a characteristic section of the Pacific Slope will support this assertion. In a village of about 1,110 people located in a dry-farming section of eastern Oregon there were six struggling churches. For the consolidation of these scattered forces a number of progressive men launched a pronounced though very kindly effort, and, as a man known to be interested in such matters and having had a little experience, I was invited into their council. At a representative mass meeting held on a Sunday afternoon I saw the real community condition set forth: Men of affairs with but one or two exceptions were lined up for consolidation, a few were awaiting developments, and a very small number were determinedly opposed. We are not likely to forget the statement of one business man, a statement expressive of the general feeling: "We do not want so many churches, we do not want so many minis-

ters, the ministers we do have we want to pay ourselves," and the congregation cheered. Out of this endeavor two churches federated, but to offset the possible influence and stay the final triumph of common-sense, the home society of one of the remaining churches subsidized the little group to the extent of \$600 per year in order that they might secure a minister of sufficient strength to hold his own against the minister of the federated church. In face of this attitude, and an intensified competition on the part of another church, the combined organization with their new community outlook had a measure of success, but of course nothing like it might have been had this town with its coterie of strong and competent leaders been permitted to attend to its own affairs according to the desire of the majority. A few miles east from the place just described I was asked to stop off at a similarly located village of about 350 people, the entire constituency being probably not more than 500. In this place there was one saloon, and it was prospering, but religion was receiving little attention. The small number of church members were scattered in three groups, all struggling for existence but incapable of accomplishment, too small and ineffective to demand attention. In this village there were some interested citizens who desired to reduce the condition to a more practical basis. The opposition was slight, and could not of itself have been long effective, but behind it was the usual outside influence and the treasuries of three missionary societies. For one society to have withdrawn would not have corrected the condition, but if all had withdrawn the spirit was such that a practical community center might soon have been established. It was a place in which the historic alignments were such that all the churches needed to be recognized. Farther east was another village, still smaller, in which there had been three separate churches, two of which had consolidated in a most successful federation. The time came when the third church was without a pastor. This the federated church considered an opportune moment for the making of overtures looking to a complete community center. A committee was appointed which met with a committee of the outstanding church and offered every reasonable concession, even to the going to their building. About three families opposed the much-desired arrangement, but

to their assistance came the outside influence. A missionary appropriation was made which made possible the calling of another minister, and the painful competition went on. Within sight of the village just referred to was another village of about 700 people. In it were five churches. Three of these churches had regular ministers and full appointments, but on account of the scattered forces were waging a losing battle, and the condition was painful. One of the three churches was self-supporting and it made overtures looking to federation. Its move expressed the sentiment of a large majority of the village. Again the outside influence prevailed against the sincere wish of the many resident citizens. Two missionary societies are operating in this field. Had they both withdrawn, a strong central church would have been established. They did not choose to withdraw, so the discouraging struggle, with its accompanying jealousies and conflicts, continues. We might go on with descriptions, but these will suffice for illustration.

While obstructions are somewhat pronounced, and discouragements not a few, the outlook is anything but hopeless. As time passes the objecting minority will grow smaller and smaller; the church official will eventually become sensitive to the pulse of the people at large and consider their interests rather than the desire of the very few; the missionary boards are becoming more and more cautious in new moves and will eventually realize that it is their privilege to withdraw altogether from the American churches of the Pacific Slope. Then will the rural centers soon show their ability to meet their own demands, and the religious and social developments for which the several societies have striven will go on apace. In this progress the past help of the "board" will not be forgotten.

In conclusion we would briefly summarize the advantages of "federation of churches" in country places. Even in the midst of present difficulties, advantages are showing up so prominently that adjustments are sure to multiply. It is not very many years since there was but one consolidated rural school; now there are over one thousand, and the number is increasing. The community churches of today are very few in number, but before ten years have passed they will be all over the land, and the countryside will have come to

its own. Among the far-reaching influences there is that broader fellowship which once having experienced we cannot get along without. In the words of one of my parishioners, those having tasted will ask, "Why didn't we do it before?" "How could we ever go back to the old way?" We become fully satisfied with Jesus' simple test of Christian character: "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, by the love ye have one for the other." In one part of my parish a chief worker was a Covenanter Presbyterian, in another part the right-hand man was an aged Wesleyan Methodist exhorter. I knew that in all details of thought we could not have agreed any more than I can agree in all things with my nearest Baptist friend, but we believed in each other. When it came to a lift, we found that the enthusiasm of the Methodist had not wasted his strength. He took his full share. Nor did the culture and moderation of the Presbyterian keep him away from the real endeavor. We found him where the drudgery was hardest. So I might go on in description of men of many names, men who but for federation would not have experienced each other's strength. We worshiped the same God, we worked for the same cause, neighborhood betterment, and perhaps one day when the words Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian are forgotten we may meet in that great community center, in that city of which the Apocalypse says, "I saw no Temple therein." My flesh thrills with the thought of it. At times the writer has known what it was to experience some inconveniences on account of his pronounced views on "rural church federation," but he considers the inconveniences more than paid for by the privilege of broader fellowship which the practice made possible. We can also testify that our church position has not been belittled. We have known men, not accustomed to such acknowledgments, voluntarily to testify to the importance of our denomination's tenets, and we have done the same in the case of other churches whose virtues we had not formerly appreciated. We have also seen churches conserved which otherwise would have become extinct.

There is also that advantage which comes from conformity to the fundamental law of God involved in social contact. Many of the possibilities of co-operative endeavors pointed out by specialists

in rural conditions, endeavors which would greatly increase the happiness and desirability of country life, are made impossible because the neighborhood leaders are divided into sundry bands through the division of church interests. One difficulty with the law enforcement in village and country places is in the diffidence which results from the too infrequent contact of the majority of the people. Citizens in small groups do not do their duty as easily and efficiently as citizens in larger groups. No denomination of Christians, no matter how it cherishes a particular idea, has any right to interfere with the God-intended method of developments such as is afforded by the contact of men with men in sufficient numbers, and in groups of sufficient variety, to provide the varied lines of talent needed for mutual helpfulness.

When in Chicago a few weeks ago I attended morning worship in the Auditorium. There were about two thousand people present. The music was inspiring, though in execution not unusual. The sermon, judged by itself, was ordinary, but preached in the midst of that great sympathetic congregation it had tremendous effect. As I sat there receiving inspiration from the service, I thought of the country district in which the very large gathering with the inspiration of the contact is not possible, and then of those church divisions which keep even the limited number in subdivided groups. For the sake of the religious and social rights of rural communities let this condition cease.